



Citation for published version:

Pavlidis, A & Fullagar, S 2013, 'Narrating the multiplicity of 'Derby Grrrl': Exploring intersectionality and the dynamics of affect in Roller Derby', *Leisure Sciences*, vol. 35, no. 5, pp. 422-437.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2013.831286>

DOI:

[10.1080/01490400.2013.831286](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2013.831286)

Publication date:

2013

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

Publisher Rights

Unspecified

University of Bath

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Pavlidis, A & Fullagar, S (2013) Narrating the multiplicity of “derby grrrl”: Exploring intersectionality and the dynamics of affect in roller derby, *Leisure Sciences*, Volume 35, Issue 5 pp. 422-437 | DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2013.831286

Abstract: Driven by an ethos of self-organization and empowerment women involved in the revived version of roller derby have created an embodied and virtual leisure practice that challenges gender norms and invites different identities. However, tensions exist in the way different women negotiate the space of roller derby and the meaning of playing, belonging and becoming “derby grrrls”. This article presents findings from a qualitative study of roller derby in Australia to make connections between feminist theories of affect and the growing body of work on intersectionality. We explore how identity categories intersect to shape the meaning of roller derby for different women. Narratives recount the complex affective relations (passion, frustration, pride, shame) that women negotiate in forming leisure identities in relation to the social context of their lives. The article aims to contribute to the development of feminist thinking about leisure as a negotiated space of transformation, creativity and difference.

Acknowledgements: We would firstly like to thank our participants for their willingness to share some of their stories. Thank you also to the anonymous reviewers. The article is much improved thanks to their suggestions and comments. Any errors are our own.

Keywords: gender, affect, roller derby, intersectionality

**Narrating the multiplicity of “derby grrrl”: Exploring intersectionality
and the dynamics of affect in roller derby**

In the last decade roller derby has been reinvented and reclaimed by women as an empowering leisure space where gendered subjectivities are played out through desires for fierce competition, creative expression and collective pleasures. It is a site of intense affects such as pride, passion, aggression, love, shame and loss. Yet, women’s affective experience of roller derby is by no means homogenous. In this article we draw upon findings from a qualitative research project to examine women’s construction of different narratives of becoming a “derby grrrl.” In this way we contribute to the growing feminist analyses of the gendered embodiment of women’s leisure and sport experiences (for example Aitchison, 2003; Atencio, 2008; Caudwell, 2006). However, we extend the focus of this work by theorising how women’s leisure or sport experiences are shaped by the interplay of social relations and affect (for notable exceptions see Fullagar, 2008; Markula, 2003; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010). Our aim is to forge connections between the literature on affect and the body of work on intersectionality as a way of exploring roller derby as a leisure experience understood in terms of multiplicity and difference (Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012; Watson & Ratna, 2011). Women’s negotiation of embodied meaning in roller derby is produced through the intersection of identity markers and material conditions related to age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, [dis]ability, and class. These biographical and social relations shape the different leisure identities of women who in turn negotiate their collective passion for the game.

Roller derby creates exciting opportunities for women to express themselves in a context that values strength and physical contact. Roller derby attempts to bring together what has historically been a masculine sporting culture, privileging strong, fit bodies and

tough competition, with a feminised culture, where art, costumes, and music are as much a part of the play as the rules (see Finley, 2010; Mabe, 2008; Storms, 2010). To explain briefly, roller derby is a team sport played on roller skates, with five people per team. The aim of the game is to score points against the opposing team. It is a contact sport, although heavily governed by rules that serve to mitigate serious injury. In Australia, roller derby started in 2007 in Melbourne and Brisbane, and it has quickly spread around the country with over 50 leagues. Worldwide there are estimated to be 1,440 leagues (O'Ninetails, 2013). There are multiple meanings evident in roller derby participation, for some there is pride in competitive sport and for others it is a leisure space for “playing” with gender and sexual identity. From a post-structural feminist perspective we explore the question of how ‘felt’ power relations are negotiated amongst women in roller derby as both leisure and gender identities are played out. We view power as relational, where “resistance” is possible from a “multiplicity of sites such as the body, discourse, knowledge, subjectivity and sexuality” (Wearing, 1998, p. 145). The multiple meanings of participation invites scholars to think differently about the social relations and affects that are produced through new leisure cultures. However, we argue that singular readings of roller derby as a leisure practice that “resists” masculine sport cultures, or provides an “alternative” culture that is free from power relations, are somewhat limited in their theoretical reach. Hence, we bring together feminist theory with our empirical analysis of two narrative constructions of roller derby to identify the complexity of women’s roller derby identities and experiences.

By drawing insights from two bodies of thought we aim to contribute to feminist perspectives on the social relations and institutions shaping freedom and constraint in women’s sport and leisure practices (Henderson, 1996; Parry & Shaw, 1999; Watson & Scraton, 2001; Watson & Scraton, 2012). The first body of thought we draw upon utilises the concept of intersectionality to critically examine the relations between different social

identities and leisure inequalities (Anderson & McCormack, 2010; McDonald, 2009; Watson & Ratna, 2011; Watson & Scraton, 2012). The second body of thought explores cultural theories of affect and emotion to extend thinking about intersectionality into embodied leisure. Our purpose in this article is to examine how women’s experience of roller derby is shaped by affects (shame, pride, pleasure) and how these affects are in turn shaped by the social relations of identity (or identities) and vice versa. Like the prominent cultural theorist Elspeth Probyn (2000), we explore how bodies in sport make “class and race matter in ways that may embarrass white middle-class [heterosexual] sensibilities” (p. 14). As a site of immense pride roller derby – much like the Gay Games that Probyn (2000) uses to situate her analysis of sport and shame – brings forwards a range of complex and productive ways of thinking about the intersections of identity and affect.

Scholars drawing upon sociology, feminist and cultural theory have started to explore the affective experience of leisure and sport in terms of socio-cultural, rather than psychological meanings (Markula, 2003; Thorpe & Rinehart, 2010). The “turn to affect” within the humanities and social sciences has emphasised the multiplicity of our identities as we experience the social world, rather than assume a unified, “essential” self (Braidotti, 2011; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Feminists have also sought to explore how affect is lived and performed through gender relations and norms that are not always self-evident. The theorization of affect has re-valued emotional meaning by pursuing a similar trajectory, begun in earlier work by Judith Butler, that does not assume a self-present subject. Rather “gender is performative in the sense that it constitutes as an effect the very subject it appears to express” (Butler, 1993, p. 314). Affect is a term that has been redeployed from its psychological origins to articulate how emotions and embodied feelings are “practiced” through social interactions, power relations and interpreted in discourse (Wetherell, 2012). In contrast to the psychological construction of affect or traditional sociological work on

emotion, cultural theorists often use affect to suggest the impossibility of understanding “feelings” as either psychological states or biological processes (Ahmed, 2004). In this sense affects are conceptualised as relational and shaped by the cultural contexts through which individuals and groups interact and perform identity. The embodied intensity of leisure and sport makes them key sites through which identity relations and power differences are played out. Ahmed (2004) has written, “Emotions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time” (p. 4). In this sense roller derby can be understood as a practice that shapes women’s experience of self in conscious and non-conscious ways, and identity relations with respect to the intersection of biography, leisure preferences and interpretative experience.

Intersectionality and leisure

In order to understand how different women make sense of their affective experience of roller derby we draw upon work on intersectionality influenced by post-structural ideas. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality to highlight the multiple inequalities experienced by black women and their invisibility in much feminist writing as a way of addressing the “multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (p. 1245). The main focus of much work on intersectionality has been the coupling of gender and race (Brown, 2011) and sometimes the triad of gender/race/class (Flintoff, Fitzgerald, & Scraton, 2008). Other axes of identity, such as [dis]ability, place, culture, religion, age and sexuality have received much less attention. Scholars have also argued for the consideration of different means and forms of identification through which subjectivity is experienced (Brown, 2011; Flintoff, et al., 2008; Valentine, 2007). Feminists have also called “for intersectional work to acknowledge both oppression and privilege in intersections of identities” (Brown, 2011, p. 3). We also agree that analysis of both

marginalized *and* privileged identities can inform a more critical understanding of women’s experiences of sport and leisure. The concept has been further refined to theorize the complex relations between identities, inequalities and social change. Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist (2008) write, “subject positions are not fixed and unified but fleeting and fluid identities emerging in continuously changing networks of humans, technologies and artefacts” (p. 567). Roller derby, as an affective practice is a prime site for exploring the shifting social relations that constrain or enable the performance of certain gender identities for different women.

In one sense roller derby is an exclusive sport culture that is characterized by its “whiteness”, reflecting broader Australian participation trends (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). As a privileged social category (Wildman & Davis), “whiteness” is often not even visible as a marker of difference as it is considered to be the “norm” against which other racialized identities are defined in their multiplicity of skin tones (Chambers, 1997). As “white” women, roller derby players are afforded privileges that produce certain affects; cultural inclusion and pride within a leisure space they feel entitled to enjoy. In light of recent leisure research (Arai & Kivel, 2009; Watson & Scraton, 2012) we note how the absence of women from different racial backgrounds in roller derby (and in our study) reveals persistent inequalities and perhaps different cultural leisure preferences. We contend that this absence is a form of exclusion that can also be understood through power relations that are affective (the feeling of not belonging, the “shaming” of others’ difference that informs exclusion) (Ahmed, 2004). However, it is beyond the scope of this article to examine the affective complexity of racialized dynamics in roller derby that exclude women who are positioned as Other.

In relation to the white participants in our study we focus on the intersection between sexuality and gender as markers of difference. The diversity between women are often minimized in the categorization of “Woman” as other to man in a cultural imaginary that assumes the masculine is default for human identity (Braidotti, 2011; Irigaray, 1993b). As

post-structural feminists have argued the masculine/feminine binary also maps across sexual identity in the heterosexual/homosexual binary that privilege the former term over the latter (Irigaray, 1993a). Queer theorists have argued that such oppositional relations limit understanding the complex interplay between gender and the performance of diverse sexual identities (Butler, 2004). Examining these less studied intersections provides a useful way of exploring the affective dimension of power relations between women who are both similar and different. We acknowledge the tensions that arise from employing the concept of “intersectionality” from a poststructuralist feminist perspective. Our use of feminist poststructuralism is not aimed at eliminating categories such as gender, sexuality, or class, but rather considers how they are constructed as stable categories and how they shift. Hence, we draw upon intersectionality as a way of troubling power relations between women in roller derby, drawing out the affective meanings performed through women’s leisure *and* social identities (Butler, 1990).

Methods

This research utilised “traditional” methods, such as ethnography and semi-structured interviews within a poststructural feminist framework that emphasised embodied meaning and the mediating effects of language (Tamboukou & Ball, 2003). The first author, with supervision by the second author, conducted her PhD research into women’s experiences of roller derby. Joining a league in 2010 the first author was excited by the opportunity roller derby afforded her to learn new skills and develop confidence on roller skates. She was also interested in the embodied (contact) and cultural aspects of roller derby as a DIY (Do it yourself) sport. Adele spent fourteen months involved with roller derby as a participant and volunteer committee member. Being a cultural “insider” allowed Adele access to the range of meanings produced for women through the sport. In the research process Simone remained an

“outsider” to the derby culture and this enabled a reflexive exploration of complex meanings. Another layer of complexity also contextualised the project with respect to the intersection of gender and sexuality: Adele was positioned as an “outsider” to queer culture, while Simone was an “insider”.

Adele conducted interviews with forty women involved in roller derby throughout Australia and collected additional textual material from blogs and official derby websites as virtual artefacts (Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2012). Berbary (Berbary & Johnson, 2012) adopted a similar approach to poststructural feminist research by utilising a “multi-method” tactic to studying a specifically female culture (see also McLeod & Thomson, 2009). In this article we focus on only two narratives that emerged from several interviews with two participants. The semi-structured interview format enabled an open exploration of women’s experiences of roller derby, the organization of the sport, and their feelings about the transformative aspects of the sport in their lives (Ussher, 1999). Sample questions included, what attracted you to roller derby? What was your skating/sport experience like prior to roller derby? How has roller derby influenced other aspects of your life? Participants were supported to explore particular issues that they felt strongly about in the interviews. Ethical clearance was gained through the authors’ affiliated university, however most of the women who participated in the research had also sought clearance with their own league committee.

In this article we aim to produce an open text by making visible the mediating process of “writing” roller derby research. We construct our interpretation of the two women’s narratives with the view to enabling different “readings”, uses and applications in theory and practice. As Game (1991) notes, “The interview itself as mediation is constitutive of the research text; relations between subjects are constituted in and through language...it is not a question of stripping away the mediations to get to the real...” (p. 30). There is no singular roller derby to get to, nor a “real” self to access in the interviews. Rather, ways of

mobilising knowledge, different understandings and possibilities for becoming are opened up through these texts. While we chose not to write women’s stories as creative analytic pieces (screenplays, poetry or fiction), for this article we do aim to be reflexive about the writing practice that informs diverse approaches to leisure research (for example Barbary & Johnson, 2012; Fullagar, 2008; Parry & Johnson, 2007).

Analysis

In selecting two women’s stories we aim to highlight the complex intersections of gender/class/sexuality as they play out in roller derby. Our approach involves an analysis of narratives, as distinct from narrative analysis, to consider *how* stories of roller derby are told and the dynamic role between the story and the storyteller. What is important is not just what is said, but *by whom* and in what context. Focusing on narratives enables an analysis of the different and contradictory layers of meaning in stories, to be brought into dialogue with each other (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008). Thinking through the notion of intersectionality we acknowledge that individuals have multiple stories, each one often privileging certain identities (Valentine, 2007). Narratives are productive, “they do things, they constitute realities, shaping the social rather than being determined by it” (Andrews, et al., 2008, p. 7). Unlike the style of narrative analysis undertaken by interpretive researchers (for example Gerard & Chick, 2004) we have not analyzed our research material according to themes, instead we have “read” each narrative against the other by drawing upon our theoretical approach.

To research affective experiences and to make the multiple identities between and within women visible, we have selected the narratives recounted by Gretel and Sarah (pseudonyms used). These narratives were carefully selected as examples where intersecting identities and diverse leisure meanings were apparent (Andrews, et al., 2008). We analysed

each interview transcript by asking: how is the meaning of derby participation articulated? What kind of leisure and social identities are evoked? What contradictions exist within and between narratives? The research participants were aware of the productive power of their narratives and the research process as a storytelling experience. By telling a certain kind of story about roller derby, these women staked out a claim for their version of the sport, and a certain kind of subjectivity for themselves. We have been sensitive to the stories they told and the emphasis they put on certain subjectivities. By using their own words we highlight not the “truth” of “who they are”, but rather how they constitute their selves as “derby grrrls” and as women more generally – how they “make themselves up.”

Gretel: Derby is a “real” sport for women

Gretel is in her early thirties and works as a graphic designer. She is employed in a large government department and also runs her own small business where she sells jewellery and other design objects. She is white and identifies as heterosexual. She has been involved in roller derby for several years. Gretel has and does play other sports competitively and articulates her identity as a sportswoman. Gretel had strong opinions about the direction of roller derby and about what it means for her. She is a member of one of the largest and strongest leagues in Australia and she has been heavily involved in its success. Gretel was interviewed twice for this project, once in December 2010 and once in April 2011, each time for approximately one hour. In the first interview Gretel told the story of how she came to be involved in roller derby and how she was highly committed to the “sport”. At that stage she was single. In the second interview, Gretel was living with a boyfriend and expressed her frustration at the challenge of balancing her commitment to roller derby, work, and her relationships.

Gretel’s story revealed the way women in sport have been marginalised. She spoke of her father’s rejection of her sporting self: “You know, my dad hates that I play, hates it... he never really came out and watched me play basketball or anything.” She also discussed the way roller derby had influenced her romantic relationships with men. Gretel was competitive and serious about roller derby. For her, there was nothing particularly aggressive or sexy inherent in the game. She stated:

I don’t know why everyone is making such a fuss about women playing full contact, it’s not like it’s rugby or anything. I mean, a lot of the time our games move from massive hits into really strategic moving of people rather than knocking the crap out of everyone, so each game is more about moving people where you want them to go, rather than knocking the shit out of everyone, so it’s less pain.

Talking about the contact aspect of roller derby, Gretel became obviously frustrated by the misperception that it was pure aggression without skill. For Gretel, roller derby was a legitimate sport and the creative dimension existed only in the embodiment of game strategy.

When they focus on injuries, or when they focus on the outfits, or when they focus on the really meaningless things, it really frustrates me, no one ever talks about how much effort or fitness goes in behind the scenes...the normal public wouldn’t realise that each team has a play book, and someone’s got to come up with those plays, and the research that’s done behind. It’s not like basketball or football or anything where you can read a book about how they’ve been coached, you have to make it up and hope that it works.

Gretel acknowledged that roller derby was different, but this difference was not about the stylistic performance of gender or sexuality. Gretel did not value what many other women in the research did, namely the interplay of sexual costumes and a tough image.

It frustrates me that the media focus on the stupid things, like, if they are so excited about women playing full contact sport why don’t they go and interview a women’s rugby team...who cares that we’re in fishnets...it’s so our arse doesn’t get stuck to the ground, just don’t understand and it’s frustrating.

Gretel rejected the view of roller derby as an “alternative” culture. Her league gained advice from professionals working within commercial football codes and decided to attempt to

emulate those sports – despite their obvious sex/gender differences and the resources available to them.

Institutionalized sports confirm patriarchal, techno-capitalist, modernist styles of living (Woodward, 2009, p. 67). Roller derby has never really adhered to these ideals, particularly with its links to rock “n” wrestling (see John Fiske 1989, pp. 86, original italics). As a means of differentiating the contemporary game of roller derby from previous versions, emphasis is often placed on the “realness” of the sport. Like Gretel’s comments above, there are women involved in roller derby who reject and rile against roller derby’s links to wrestling, seeing it as somehow tainting, their sport. Linking the sport to the entertainment spectacle of wrestling somehow “softens” the athleticism that women do enjoy as “derby grrls”. As noted by Ahmed (2004), to be perceived as “soft” is to risk influence or damage by others. To be soft is to be too emotional, too feminine. In this way,

Emotions become attributes of collectives, which get constructed as ‘being’ through ‘feeling’. Such attributes are of course gendered: the soft national body is a feminised body, which is ‘penetrated’ or ‘invaded’ by others. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 2)

Gretel wants to experience the pride of “winning” and roller derby produces pleasurable affects (strength and power intertwined), in relation to her rejection of “soft” affects so often attributed to women. She was frustrated, ashamed, and even disgusted, with the “girlyness” of some other women in derby that she defined her gender identity against:

I see a lot of emotions getting in the way in a lot of leagues...I don't know if it's people not getting the attention that they want and they feel the need to throw a hissy fit or things are blown out of proportion that really shouldn't be.

For Gretel, roller derby is an affective practice involving pushing her body, intense pride, and experiencing the thrill of competition. Gretel’s derby sportswoman identity intersects with her gender, sexuality, whiteness, age and socio-economic status to produce very particular meanings and related affects. Feelings of aggression and the desire to win (to

be the best) are mediated by her relation to derby as “real” and of herself as a white, female, heterosexual athlete. Her status as a university educated woman with the privilege of whiteness and the resources to travel different countries around the world, allows Gretel to reject the queer, feminized and playful aspects of roller derby. She is able to critique the way other women have configured this leisure space while still pushing forward her view of roller derby as an “empowering” sport for women. Her anger and shame at the emphasis some women put on the “culture” associated with roller derby – particularly when promoted as risqué, “dangerous” and sexual – was related to her desire to adhere to some notions of heterosexual femininity whilst still having the opportunity to participate in a contact sport. As a young, educated woman she was what McRobbie has termed a “top girl” (2007). She had exchanged collective feminist critique of patriarchy with the opportunity for individual success in education and work – and pride in sport. McRobbie has commented on this desire for success, “young women are able to come forward on condition that feminism fades away” (2009, p. 56).

Sport has long been known as a site through which the construction and reconstruction of masculine hegemony is perpetuated (Bryson, 1987). For men, this has meant the privileging of one dominant form of masculinity: heterosexual, competitive, aggressive and powerful. For women this has meant a negotiation, between their desire to compete and push themselves, and their desire to be accepted in relation to heteronormativity. Gretel wants to be taken seriously as a sportswoman. She knows the shame of being seen as “unfeminine”- her father has already rejected her sporting self – and is aware of the stigma that women in sport have to contend with. Gretel is willing to risk having her feminine subjectivity questioned within a dominant culture in exchange for the right to play – in exchange for the right to push her body to the limits in a sport where strength and toughness are revered. As observed by Hargreaves, “The stereotype of the mannish lesbian athlete

pressured women to display the characteristics and insignia of heterosexuality – to display to the world that they were “real” women” (2000, p. 135). “Real” women don’t *like* aggression – it is just an unavoidable part of the game. “Real” women don’t aspire to masculine strength; “real” women don’t enjoy pain; “real” women are clean and nice. Gretel wants to play hard in roller derby but she also maintains that it is a “clean” sport, with a rulebook and guidelines.

Her desire to separate “sport” from “sexuality” was shaped by the complex intersection of categories – white, heterosexual, educated, city dwelling, single/partnered, able bodied – which in turn surfaced varying affects. She stated,

I make sure that when I meet guys I don’t mention derby...I’ve just had some bad experiences with one guy that came, and then asked me out, and he seemed nice ...and he turned into a really bad stalker, so I’m really nervous around guys that know that I play derby cause they assume that you’re like this, they assume that you’re ‘easy’ cause you’re wearing tiny little shorts and you’re wearing fishnets and they assume that you’re into S and M and they just categorize you into, they just put you in this box and I don’t like that. So if they don’t know then they can’t categorize me.

Despite her passion for the game, Gretel feels highly ambivalent about roller derby. This became more intense over time as the stress – the time and commitment, as well as the affective relations that needed to be managed and negotiated – seemed to overwhelm her. When she did meet a man who she felt could accept her derby participation without judgement, she wanted to keep the relationship separate from her derby life. She said, “ I just need a space where I don’t talk about roller derby... he knows that I don’t like talking about roller derby outside of roller derby.” Living with different intersecting identities Gretel’s heterosexual femininity is imbued with shame about her pride as a roller derby player.

Sarah: The “play” of identity in Derby

Sarah was 21 years old at the time of her interviews, and was our youngest participant. Sarah is white and was studying at university (humanities). She chose not to define her sexuality. Living in a rural area Sarah had been involved with her league for

several months when first interviewed. Derby enabled her to “find her own voice and image of herself,” and not be defined by other people’s views. Sarah was interviewed twice for this project, in November 2010 and April 2011, and each interview went for over 70 minutes. In the first interview Sarah recounted how she came to be involved with roller derby, how it influenced other parts of her life, and what she thought of her league. Her responses were very considered and she discussed roller derby in a very inclusive, broad way. She seemed to be quite detached from her responses in terms of emotional investment at that time. In the second interview Sarah had recently been voted onto the volunteer committee of her league and she told a much more impassioned story about her league.

Sarah’s story of roller derby can be read as quite different to Gretel’s “sport” identity. Sarah, like Gretel, identified how sexuality was invoked (in heteronormative ways that she did not choose) within the gendered performance of roller derby. She stated, “I find that a lot (of) people assume I am a lesbian now that I play derby... I still have people thinking that it’s just a lesbian sport... I guess it’s that idea that it’s tough and the whole idea of butch women, butch lesbianism.” She goes on to say, “I don’t think they have any right and they’re just making assumptions based on appearance, so, yeah, so that’s pretty confronting.” Yet despite this, unlike Gretel, Sarah did not desire separate social and derby identities. Instead, she found roller derby to be a space where she could creatively play with both, stating, “I find that roller derby is a really good space to find your own voice within image and the name as well, you get to kind of, make your own identity.” Sarah chose not to “define” her sexuality, preferring to understand roller derby (and herself as a participant), as fluid and open to multiple readings. She talked about how she would wear a dress to training, while enjoying the opportunity to confuse her family about her sexual orientation. About her father’s perception of her as a lesbian in relation to roller derby, she stated,

I find that I kind of combat that and kind of shove it in his face by not saying, ‘no I am not’, or ‘yes I am’, so that’s kind of fun in a way, yeah, I

think it’s helped me that way in that I don’t have to tell people what I am and what I am not, and if they want to make assumptions that’s their prerogative, but I am not going to buy into that kind of crap

Sarah enjoyed the way people interpreted her gender identity differently and saw this as part of roller derby’s appeal. She explains,

I like to think that roller derby is about you displaying your own identity within your name and creating an alter ego through dress and through colors and through whatever name you give yourself, but then displaying that kind of image is appealing to one idea of derby and it makes people conform and I don’t think it should be about conforming to other people’s expectations, I think it should be about your own, so I think it’s kind of restricting that space for self identity and I think that’s been one of the most positive experiences for me that I have felt more confident within myself, within my own image, and yeah, just being okay to do whatever I want to do instead of what people expect of me.

Sarah was not a particularly strong skater when she started derby, but for her it was fun, so she “just kept going back.” Feelings of belonging and love were vital to her enjoyment and experience. Ahmed argues that, “identification involves the desire to get closer to others by becoming like them...becoming like them obviously requires not being them in the first place” (Ahmed, 2004, p. 126). Overtime, Sarah felt as though roller derby was a place she could belong:

Then it’s a community it, it’s kind of positive as an experience, of like women...I have never really had that where I have had just women, or lots of women working together towards something like that, and all different ages and all different skills.

Where sport has traditionally been a site of heterosexual masculinity, strength and toughness, roller derby, and the women involved, are attempting to reconfigure sport as a site of femininity, in its multiplicity, *and* strength and toughness. This is a difficult and fraught move. Through a focus on collective pride and “personal best”, feelings of shame, such as those disclosed by Gretel about men’s perception of her as a derby grrrl, are marginalised. Like Gretel, Sarah talks about her passion for competitive sport and the opportunity roller derby has afforded her to express aggression. She stated, “I have always been really competitive...I like pushing myself... I don’t think it should be just males territory either,

there’s no reason for it not to be okay for women to be rough.” Yet, this “hardness” and “toughness” is not the absence of emotion, but, as articulated by Ahmed, “*a different emotional orientation towards others*” (2004, p. 4, original italics). Sarah attempts to express an open, broad view of roller derby as a sport space that evokes collective pride. In her desire to be rough she experiences roller derby as pleasurable and as a site of pride. She is able to play sport and be part of a community of women where female sexuality is configured differently (while this association is problematic for Gretel).

For Sarah, as a young woman who felt quite separate from many of her peers growing up and expressed feeling unhappy at many points of her life, participating in roller derby has been an opportunity to play with her [gender] identity and feel part of something meaningful. Being part of roller derby brings Sarah happiness. Over and over Sarah said, “it feels really great.” Yet this affect was not “caught” like a contagious virus, but rather it was produced through the ongoing practice of roller derby (Ahmed, 2004; Blackman, 2012). She acknowledges the complexity of roller derby, while finding it to be a space of “exhilaration” and “freedom.” She stated,

I think it feels really great. It also feels challenging, and it’s hard sometimes ... because it’s so personal, you can get really passionate about one idea and if other people don’t agree with that it’s hard to do, it can be frustrating sometimes too, trying to get skills up, or seeing that other people are better than you in a shorter time...it feels pretty exhilarating...it’s pretty freeing...I like the fact that in derby it’s about skills, so you don’t necessarily have to be playing or winning for it to be possible...

Because of her fluid conception of her own sexuality Sarah was able to speak openly about the tensions that were playing out in her league particularly as they related to the performance of sexuality as either “straight or gay”. She stated,

We are getting that kind of idea that we are a gay league, so some of the other women in the league, like the ones that are married or are straight, they don’t like that, so there has been a bit of friction over that, they don’t want to be seen as the gay league when they are not and that’s fair enough, but it’s been interesting.

Sarah’s narrative of roller derby privileges collective pride, in a way that Gretel’s does not, because of the different intersections of identity for the two women. For Sarah, roller derby enables her to express an ambiguous sexuality and is a space where she can feel pride – not only for her sporting ability but also for her refusal to adhere to heteronormative performances of subjectivity. Aspects of her identity that were marginalised in other spaces were now privileged, and she was enjoying the affects that surfaced through this new relation between herself and others.

Discussion: Intersecting power relations in roller derby

The negotiations, between pride and shame, joy and disappointment, winning and losing, heterosexuality and homosexuality, are played out by women in roller derby through different intersecting identities. Earlier we quoted Styhre and Eriksson-Zetterquist who wrote about the way subject positions are fleeting and fluid, “emerging in continuously changing networks of humans, technologies and artefacts” (2008, p. 567). Today, class tensions and identification play out in different ways with the globalized, highly mediated leiscapes that individuals negotiate (Blackshaw, 2010; Skeggs, 2004). Jennifer Carlson (2010) has written of roller derby as a subculture and observed that although women may enjoy the sport and the opportunities to participate in hyperbole and parody, this alone does not challenge the status quo or more pervasive structural gender inequalities within global capitalism. This observation by Carlson speaks to the need for an analysis of roller derby from alternative perspectives that account for difference and more nuanced opportunities for social change.

Roller derby is more than a conventional game of sport, it is a diverse leisure space produced *by* and *for* women where the embodied contest is against normalised gender ideals that position women as meek, fragile and defined in relation to men and masculine desire. Like the Gay Games, roller derby is attempting to resignify sport as inclusive, cooperative,

and a site of pride for diverse sexualities and genders (Probyn, 2000). In this space, women such as Gretel and Sarah, experience their leisure and social identities through heteronormative gender relations that position them as gendered subjects with similarities and differences. For Gretel there is intense pride on the track, and shame off the track as she negotiates her heterosexual sexuality and professional work identity through roller derby as a space where “sexy”, “queer” and “tough” versions of femininity are performed. For Sarah there is pleasure and pride as she embraces the opportunity to enact alternative sexualities and explore different aspects of her identity as a young woman. For both women there is shame felt as their fathers reject their ‘derby’ selves as incompatible with heteronormative femininity. However, they are positioned differently: Gretel attempts to separate her sporting self from the queer derby culture, while Sarah revels in the culture of resistance.

Betsy Wearing, drawing on Foucault’s conception of “heterotopia,” suggests that leisure spaces can be a site “for struggle against and resistance to domination of the self and inferiorized subjectivities” (Wearing, 1998, p. 146). Yet, this notion of resistance can be misunderstood as being premised upon a singular, self-present subject. For Gretel and Sarah roller derby is both a personal space and a social practice produced through complex intersectional relations of gender, class and sexuality that shift across different contexts (leisure, work, relationships). Through roller derby they have experienced a process of subjectification – “the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject” (Foucault in Rabinow, 1991, p. 11). The identities available to women in derby are actively produced as a socially situated process of self-formation. As Foucault notes, the process of becoming subjects occurs via “operations on [people’s] own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct” (in Rabinow, 1991, p. 11). It is the way they understand themselves, their actions, thoughts and conduct. These women perform and regulate their

roller derby identities through narratives of self and affective relations with other women in their league and the derby community more generally.

Thinking through the concept of intersectionality we can trace how women, such as Gretel and Sarah, are positioned differently in the same affective leisure or sport spaces. Crenshaw comments on the importance of understanding how gender intersects with other markers of identity and that, “ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups” (1991, p. 1242). In this article we have begun to explore how the stories told by participants about their gendered lives – social backgrounds, leisure and work interests, material resources and family relationships – intersect to shape specific narratives of roller derby as a space for women’s athleticism and performing selfhood. Yet intersectionality, as it is often deployed, tends to present gendered subjects as determined by static, social structures: “there is a tendency towards fixing categories and identities” (Staunæs, 2003, p. 103). In considering the concept of intersectionality from a post-structural perspective, space is made for understanding the complexity and fluidity of roller derby subjectivities that are performed, expressed and regulated as part of the leisure experience.

Staunæs, in her attempt to create a more pluralistic approach to the intersection of social categories states, “the intersectionality of categories can be described as ways of compensating, overshadowing, saturating, hiding and drowning one another” and also work to “reinforce, destabilise, oppose, or counteract one another” (2003, p. 109). Certain subjectivities (tough working class grrrls, sexy professional bodies, strong and fast mothers) are privileged over others (self-sacrificing, weak, morally virtuous) in an ongoing process of subjectification that plays out on the derby track. In this particular research project the narratives presented were of white women and hence they do not tell of the experiences of women from different racial backgrounds, yet they highlight “white femininity” in sport, particularly as it relates to sexuality. Including these “privileged” voices in research we have

been able to explore the more subtle and nuanced intersections of identity, including differences in affective response in roller derby. Further analysis of racialized gender relations within in sport and leisure is needed considering the overwhelming majority of “white” participants driving new practices like roller derby.

Rather than simply interpret roller derby as a uniformly resistant or subversive gendered practice, as a site of pride *or* shame, a more productive approach recognises the social relations that shape the [at times oppositional] affects in play. Women’s diverse narratives of roller derby also recount their experiences of subjectification as they embody, transform and become derby players; occupying different subject positions with respect to their own biographies and those of other women. Exploring the turn to affect within cultural studies, Hemmings (2005) critically examines the way affect has recently been deployed. While some theorists, such as Massumi, have explored the “autonomy of affect” (2002) as it escapes the codification of meaning in language, Hemmings (2005) takes a more relational stance by viewing embodied affects as that which intimately connects the self and others via shared judgements (pp. 564 - 565). These judgements about the value of leisure in women’s lives are intimately connected to the judgements made about the identities and desires of “other” women who play. Hence, roller derby exists as a fluid leisure space where passion and frustration, pride and shame, disgust and pleasure, anger and love, play out amidst everyday negotiations about women’s sameness or difference. In telling their stories our research participants have shared their gendered experience of becoming derby grrrls in terms of felt, affective power relations that intersect in ways that can “empower”, or marginalise, particular identities, styles and meanings both “within” and “beyond” the space of roller derby.

The concept of intersectionality is particularly useful for exploring women’s diverse experiences of becoming gendered subjects through leisure or sport spaces that embrace

alternative lifestyles, DIY ethics and a desire to belong. Becoming, and belonging, in roller derby do not occur via linear, stable pathways. Rather, the complex interactions between social, cultural and affective relations often creates challenges for league organisers and is little recognised in the sport or leisure management literature. Beccy Watson and Aarti Ratna (2011) write, “researchers need to scrutinize claims purporting diversity and to acknowledge and account for different social relations within the same leisure spaces; to look in more detail at the multilayers in practice” (p. 83). Incorporating aspects of women’s life “outside” of roller derby into a narrative based analysis of their experiences of becoming-derby, we have begun to examine these gendered “multilayers” in practice. There is no singular “derby-grrrl” that can be categorised to reveal how she feels and thinks about sport or leisure. But neither is there endless individual difference among the women involved. There are subtle intersections relating to ability, experience, and affective orientations (pleasure and pain/pride and shame) that shape women’s experience of roller derby as transformative. We do not suggest that this is a simple turn towards a politics of diversity, because, as noted by Rita Felski (1997), this “ignores systematic inequalities among women in access to power, knowledge, and material resources” (p. 11). Instead, Gretel and Sarah, as well as many other women interviewed as part of the broader research project, have shared a common desire to embody strength, risk and pride. They have shared a desire to overcome the felt and discursive aspects of their feminised bodies, to trouble heteronormative femininity, while still maintaining a broad identification as women.

Focusing on affect has given us a way of understanding the multiplicity of leisure subjectivities: the frustration, joy and excitement. Importantly, exploring affect helps inform a feminist imaginary for leisure studies. This is not an easy path to navigate, but if we approach women’s leisure in terms of its complexity we are more likely to understand the possibilities and dangers inherent as we imagine a more inclusive, just society. As women

(and indeed men) seek new ways to be active in an increasingly global and connected world there are opportunities for us, as leisure researchers, to explore both limitations and possibilities.

Incorporating affect into our analysis of women’s leisure can help us move leisure studies forward by questioning the limitations of static or singular interpretations. As McRobbie (2009) noted,

The attribution of both freedom and success to young women, as a series of interpellative processes, take different forms across the boundaries of class, ethnicity and sexuality, producing a range of entanglements of racialized and classified configurations of youthful femininity (p. 58).

To this we would also add the more subtle boundaries of educational achievement, age, ability and geography in producing multiple configurations of femininity. The narratives presented in this article highlight the centrality of desire – in particular the desire for freedom and success - in women’s pursuit of, and investment in, roller derby. Roller derby is an everyday site where pleasure and pride are celebrated as a significant aspect of women’s public leisure lives. Whether that pleasure is gained via subjecting the bodies to rigorous training and competition, or through the fun of “dressing up” or enjoying music, or even through the social bonds formed by being involved in a sporting community, roller derby is not just freedom or resistance but an embodied of both in the process of subjectification. Women become roller “derby grrrls” through different forms of identification and through the shared pleasure and pain of creating their own roller derby community. Yet, there remain some homogenised aspects of this community as our research also identified the lack of women from different cultural backgrounds or those with disabilities. As pressure mounts to “organise” roller derby into a more structured sport, consideration of affect and the role of pleasure, pain, shame and pride, needs to be taken into account. Stories, like those told by Gretel and Sarah, and the differences between them provide rich accounts of the complexity of leisure or sport experiences that are often construed in commonsense terms as unified and

obvious. In this sense there is not one roller derby that can be easily “known” or managed; there are multiple, even contradictory versions at play, that encompass affective relations between women and diverse biographies of involvement.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, S. (2004). *The cultural politics of emotion*. New York: Routledge.
- Aitchison, C. C. (2003). *Gender and leisure: Social and cultural perspectives*. London: Psychology Press.
- Anderson, E., & McCormack, M. (2010). Intersectionality, critical race theory, and American sporting oppression: Examining Black and gay male athletes. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57(8), 949-967.
- Andrews, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. (2008). Doing narrative research Retrieved from <http://srmo.sagepub.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/view/doing-narrative-research/d2.xml> doi:10.4135/9780857024992
- Arai, S., & Kivel, D. (2009). Critical Race Theory and Social Justice Perspectives on Whiteness, Difference(s) and (Anti)racism: A Fourth Wave of Race Research in Leisure Studies. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 41(4), 459-470.
- Atencio, M. (2008). 'Freaky is just how I get down': investigating the fluidity of minority ethnic feminine subjectivities in dance. *Leisure Studies*, 27(3), 311-327.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2006). *Migrants and participation in sport and physical activity*. Canberra: Australian Government Retrieved from [http://www.ausport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/286029/ABS - migrants participation sport physical activity.pdf](http://www.ausport.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/286029/ABS_-_migrants_participation_sport_physical_activity.pdf).
- Berbarry, L. A., & Johnson, C. W. (2012). The American sorority girl recast: an ethnographic screenplay of leisure in context. *Leisure/Loisir*, 36(3-4), 243-268.
- Blackman, L. (2012). *Immaterial bodies: Affect, embodiment, mediation*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Blackshaw, T. (2010). *Leisure*. London: Routledge.
- Braidotti, R. (2011). *Nomadic Subjects* (2 ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, M. (2011). Gender and sexuality I: intersectional anxieties. *Progress in Human Geography*, DOI: 10.1177/0309132511420973, 1-10.
- Bryson, L. (1987). Sport and the maintenance of masculine hegemony. [doi: 10.1016/0277-5395(87)90052-5]. *Women's studies international forum*, 10(4), 349-360.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.
- Carlson, J. (2010). The female significant in all-women's amateur roller derby. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 27(4), 428-440.
- Caudwell, J. (2006). *Sport, sexualities and queer/theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Chambers, R. (1997). 'The unexamined'. In M. Hill (Ed.), *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (pp. 187-203). New York: New York University Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, 1241-1299.
- Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Felski, R. (1997). The doxa of difference. *Signs*, 23(1), 1-21.
- Finley, N. J. (2010). Skating Femininity: Gender Maneuvering in Women's Roller Derby. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39(4), 359 - 387.

- Fiske, J. (1989). *Understanding popular culture*. London: Routledge.
- Flintoff, A., Fitzgerald, H., & Scraton, S. (2008). The challenges of intersectionality: researching difference in physical education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 18(2), 73-85.
- Fullagar, S. (2008). Leisure Practices as Counter-Depressants: Emotion-Work and Emotion-Play within Women's Recovery from Depression. *Leisure Sciences*, 30(1), 35-52. doi: 10.1080/01490400701756345
- Game, A. (1991). *Undoing the social: Towards a deconstructive sociology*. Buckingham: Open university press.
- Gerard, K., & Chick, G. (2004). Enduring leisure involvement: The importance of personal relationships. *Leisure Studies*, 23(3), 243-266.
- Hargreaves, J. (2000). *Heroines of sport*. London: Routledge.
- Hemmings, C. (2005). Invoking affect. *Cultural Studies*, 19(5), 548-567.
- Henderson, K. A. (1996). One Size Doesn't Fit All: The Meaning of Women's Leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*.
- Irigaray, L. (1993a). *An ethics of sexual difference* (C. Burke, Gill, C, Trans.). New York: Cornell University Press.
- Irigaray, L. (1993b). *This Sex Which is Not One* (C. Porter, Trans.). New York: Cornell University Press.
- Mabe, C. (2008). *Roller derby. The history and all-girl revival of the greatest sport on wheels*. Denver: Speck Press.
- Markula, P. (2003). The technologies of the self: Sport, feminism, and Foucault. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 20, 87-107.
- Massumi, B. (2002). *Parables for the virtual*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- McDonald, M. G. (2009). Dialogues on whiteness, leisure and (anti) racism. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 41(1), 5-21.
- McLeod, J., & Thomson, R. (2009). *Researching social change: Qualitative approaches*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- McRobbie, A. (2007). Top girls? *Cultural Studies*, 21(4), 718-737.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. London: Sage.
- O'Ninetails, C. (2013). Roller Derby Worldwide Retrieved March 10, 2013, from <http://www.derbyroster.com>
- Parry, D. C., & Johnson, C. W. (2007). Contextualizing Leisure Research to Encompass Complexity in Lived Leisure Experience: The Need for Creative Analytic Practice. [doi: 10.1080/01490400601160721]. *Leisure Sciences*, 29(2), 119-130. doi: 10.1080/01490400601160721
- Parry, D. C., & Shaw, S. M. (1999). The role of leisure in women's experiences of menopause and mid-life. *Leisure Sciences*, 21(3), 205-218.
- Pavlidis, A., & Fullagar, S. (2012). Becoming roller derby grrrls: Exploring the gendered play of affect in mediated sport cultures. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, DOI: 10.1177/1012690212446451 1-16.
- Probyn, E. (2000). Sporting bodies: dynamics of shame and pride. *Body & Society*, 6(1), 13-28.
- Rabinow, P. (Ed.). (1991). *The Foucault reader: An introduction to Foucault's thought*. London: Penguin Books.
- Skeggs, B. (2004). Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'. *The Sociological Review*, 52(S2), 75-95.
- Staunæs, D. (2003). Where have all the subjects gone? Bringing together the concepts of intersectionality and subjectification. *NORA: Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 11(2), 101-110.
- Storms, C. E. (2010). There's no sorry in roller derby: A feminist examination of the collective identity formation of women in the full contact sport of roller derby. *New York Sociologist*, 3, 68 - 87.

- Styhre, A., & Eriksson-Zetterquist, U. (2008). Thinking the multiple in gender and diversity studies: examining the concept of intersectionality. *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, 23(8), 567-582.
- Tamboukou, M., & Ball, S. J. (2003). Genealogy and ethnography: fruitful encounters or dangerous liaisons? In S. J. Ball & M. Tamboukou (Eds.), *Dangerous Encounters. Genealogy and Ethnography* (pp. 1-36). New York: Peter Lang.
- Thorpe, H., & Rinehart, R. (2010). Alternative sport and affect: non-representational theory examined. *Sport in Society*, 13(7-8), 1268-1291.
- Ussher, J. (1999). Feminist approaches to qualitative health research. *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and method*, 98-114.
- Valentine, G. (2007). Theorizing and Researching Intersectionality: A Challenge for Feminist Geography*. *The Professional Geographer*, 59(1), 10-21.
- Walby, S., Armstrong, J., & Strid, S. (2012). Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities in Social Theory. *Sociology*, 46(2), 224-240. doi: 10.1177/0038038511416164
- Watson, B., & Ratna, A. (2011). Bollywood in the park: Thinking intersectionally about public leisure space. *Leisure/Loisir*, 35(1), 71-86. doi: 10.1080/14927713.2011.549198
- Watson, B., & Scraton, S. (2001). Confronting Whiteness? Researching the leisure lives of South Asian mothers. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 10(3), 265-277.
- Watson, B., & Scraton, S. J. (2012). Leisure studies and intersectionality. [doi: 10.1080/02614367.2012.707677]. *Leisure Studies*, 32(1), 35-47. doi: 10.1080/02614367.2012.707677
- Wearing, B. (1998). *Leisure and feminist theory*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Wetherell, M. (2012). *Affect and Emotion. A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.
- Wildman, M., & Davis, A. D. Making systems of privilege visible. In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Woodward, K. (2009). *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.